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ABSTRACT

Procedures for generating evaluation questions in the Discrepancy Evaluation Model (DEM) are problematic as they are described in the literature. These procedures would lead to unmanageably or ineffectively long lists of questions. Any process of narrowing down the list must be drawn from other sources. One such source, developed for a specific project, focuses on maximizing utilization potential. This procedure essentially takes the outcomes of the program's Input-Process-Output charts to determine the likelihood that information about each outcome will be useful for decisions or policy considerations. Key program staff answer each question with a scaled response. The responses are tallied and used to stimulate discussion among the staff. Consensus is sought on priority outcomes and concerns around each from which the evaluators develop the evaluation questions. The paper presents this procedure in more detail, an example of its use, and discusses the benefits from its application to a major employment training technical assistance program. (PN)

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A UTILIZATION - FOCUSED PROCEDURE FOR PRIORITIZING EVALUATION QUESTIONS IN THE DISCREPANCY MODEL

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I. The Discrepancy Model

The Discrepancy Evaluation Model (DEM), developed by Malcolm Provus (1971), defines evaluation as the comparison of a social system's performance (P) to a standard (S) of how the system should operate. If a difference is found between the P and the S, this difference is known as a discrepancy (D) and signals a need to change the P, the S, or both.

Probably the most important contribution of the DEM, and its most widely applied aspect, is that of the manner in which the S is determined. It comes from the program staff's detailed delineation of their program as it should operate. This description is worked out in a component analysis, breaking the program into its major activities, functions, or components. Each component is in turn broken into its subcomponents, and these breakdowns are continued in nested fashion to a level of detail appropriate for program management. This feature of the DEM makes it particularly useful for the evaluation of multi-faceted social programs.

Each component and subcomponent is further described in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs. From these input-process-output (IPO) charts, evaluation questions are developed, the data collection and analysis plans are determined, and the more conventional evaluation takes place.

II. The Problem of Getting Evaluation Questions

If the DEM is used in a truly multifaceted program -- one with a central organizational focus but many quite diverse goals, delivery procedures, clients and/or locations -- and evaluation questions are generated from the items in the component analysis

IPO charts, very simply put, there are too many evaluation questions for either manageability or meaningful information yield. On the more practical side, there may not be enough evaluation resources to answer all the questions raised. There is a need, therefore, to pare down the list of evaluation questions or to focus on a subset of program components on which to raise questions.

There appears to be no guidance for this focusing from Provus or from the literature which develops the DEM beyond his initial conceptions. Provus (1971) shows the general questions to be raised about each of the articulating stages of program design, installation, process, product, (and cost), such as: Has the program been installed?, If not, why not?, and Have the objectives been achieved? But in a multifaceted program, more likely some parts are installed and some are not. And different reasons apply to each situation. Even with this focus, the specific questions that need to be asked would still constitute a long list. Steinmetz (1976), in the closest he gets to giving direction on this issue, states that "Dozens of (evaluation questions) may be asked and many can be answered through formal interviews, meetings, or planning sessions. Some will be pursued more formally depending upon the interests and needs of management and the problems and cost involved in collecting the information" (p. 5). Orchowsky and Robbins (1978) also apparently recognize the need for focusing, but only state that fact. They describe the process of designing the evaluation in DEM as proceeding in two phases: "First, several areas within the program design are identified which will be subject to evaluation. These are known as evaluation concerns. Next, a set of evaluation questions is formulated for each evaluation concern. These questions are used to direct the collection of performance data

(p. 7)." Presumably each DEM evaluator guides the question-raising and focusing process in whatever manner he or she sees fit, or through some method negotiated with the client.

The remainder of this paper presents one response to the foreoing dilemma in an actual evaluation setting.

III. The Setting and Procedure

The project evaluated, the Youth Employment Technical Assistance Program (YETAP), was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor during 1981-82 under a grant to a major private employment and training organization (it was one of four which received such a grant). Its purpose was to prove technical assistance to 23 of its local affiliates and non-affiliated community-based organizations across the nation in strengthening their youth employment training programs. The services varied across some 15 major topic areas and were provided in somewhat customized fashion to each client agency. RMC received a contract from the service organization to serve as an external evaluator for the YETAP. For a number of reasons, among which were the organization's desire for an evaluation system which also served a management planning function and the multifaceted nature of the program, the DEM was decided upon by both RMC and the client to guide the evaluation.

Once the component analysis was completed by the YETAP staff under the evaluator's guidance, the task of raising evaluation questions was addressed. It was clear that using all inputs, processes and outputs from the IPO charts to guide question-raising was absurd because of the sheer numbers of those items. The decision was made to focus on the outputs only since, first of all, many of these served as inputs

to other processes and, second, the need for an "outcome evaluation" to present to the funding agent was then perceived as critical. But even still there were 51 outputs about which to raise questions concerning both their occurrence and their quality. The evaluators' resources were limited and the YETAP staff was thought to be reaching the limits of their tolerance for having to contribute still more to the "evaluation" process.

We therefore narrowed the outcomes to be evaluated even further by applying an explicit utilization focus. That is, we screened the outputs according to criteria thought to maximize the likelihood that answers to questions about these outputs would be used for decisions or policy deliberations. More specifically, we asked five questions of each output:

Will evaluation information on this outcome:

1) help make program decisions?

2) be required/desired by DOL?

3) be required/desired by (the agency delivering YETAP)?

4) be useful for future technical assistance projects?

5) provide input for other (agency) special programs?

These questions were placed on a rating form, as column headings. The 51 outputs were placed on the form as row headings. The cells in the resulting matrix were completed by answering the screening questions for each output on a 3-point scale: 1 = definitely not; 2 = possibly; 3 = definitely. (A sample section from the rating form is shown in Figure 1.)

Each YETAP staff member completed the rating forms individually (in about 1 hour -- some responses to some outputs are trivial and can be dismissed quickly, others take some thought).

Figure 1

Sample Section of Rating Form

Directions: For each outcome listed on the left, write in one of the following numbers under each question at the top.

1 = Definitely not 2 = Possibly 3 = Definitely

Will evaluation information on this outcome:

	1. Help Make Program Decisions?	2. Be Required/ Desired By DOL?	3. Be Required/ Desired By (Agency)?	4. Be Useful To Future Technical Assistance Projects?	5. Provide Input for Other (Agency) Special Programs?	TOTAL
(2.A.) Needs Assessment						
• Establish working relationship with sites.						
• Questionnaire/Interview data from sites.						
• Informational knowledge of sites.						
• Data from YETAP perspective.						
• Statements of need.						
(2.B.) Identify Resource						
• Availability of resources to meet highest priority needs. --commitment of consultants and staff. --specified dates of activities.						
(2.C.) Training Agreements						
• Clear understanding of services to be provided.						
• Measurable objectives.						
• Number of workshops and topics known.						

Figure 1 (Cont.)

Sample Section of Rating Form

Directions: For each outcome listed on the left, write in one of the following numbers under each question at the top.

1 = Definitely not 2 = Possibly 3 = Definitely

Will evaluation information on this outcome:

	1. Help Make Program Decisions?	2. Be Required/ Desired By DOL?	3. Be Required/ Desired By (Agency)?	4. Be Useful To Future Technical Assistance Projects?	5. Provide Input for Other (Agency) Special Programs?	TOTAL
(3.B.) Workshops • Increased skill or knowledge of participants in workshop topics. • Increased familiarity among local community youth programs to promote local linkage and communication. • Locals' positive perceptions of workshops.						

Then the four YETAP staff met together with the two evaluators. The object now was to reach consensus on those outputs most worth investigating. Several ways of proceeding are possible at this juncture. We asked for those outcomes for which at least one person had a total score of 15 (i.e., a "definitely" answer to all five screening questions). Each such outcome was then discussed by the staff, with the person(s) giving the 15 rating explaining their judgments and others arguing against it if they wished. If at the end all agreed that that outcome was in fact important, then it was placed on the "priority" list. If not, it was passed over (sometimes to come up again as part of another outcome). Two or three outcomes were nominated in this manner, and one was rejected for lack of consensus. After the outcomes with 15 ratings were exhausted, then those with a 14 were nominated, and so on until the point at which consensus was too difficult to reach (almost a 10 rating). The ratings process was a heuristic device rather than a strict formula. The discussions that ensued on each item had great benefit a little later, when the evaluators actually formulated the evaluation questions.

As a result of the ratings and consensus process, nine outcomes were chosen (with H, M or L priority designated in parentheses):

- Measurable Training Objectives (H)
- Locals' perceptions of workshops (H)
- Locals' increased skill and knowledge of workshop topics (H)
- Adequacy of feasibility data (H)
- Adequacy of communications between YETAP and locals (H)
- Data on needs and needs statements (H)
- Youths' perceptions of Youth Employment Days (M)

- o Networking (Youth Employment Day and Newsletter) (H)
- o Clear understanding of YETAP services by locals (L)

Each priority outcome was discussed by RMC and YETAP in an effort to further articulate YETAP concerns. During this discussion, the evaluators gained a specific sense of any obstacles and concerns of YETAP. This information served two purposes. First, it helped to <u>further</u> prioritize the outcomes into high (H), medium (M) and low (L) categories enabling the evaluators to better focus the evaluation design. Second, the concerns articulated by the YETAP staff gave the evaluators more detailed guidance in developing the evaluation questions and instruments.

Each YETAP outcome of concern, in order of priority, was translated by RMC into a draft set of evaluation questions and subquestions. This draft set was discussed with key YETAP staff. Revisions were made and a finalized set of questions was prepared as follows:

1. To what extent were the training agreement objectives accomplished?

   Were there differences across technical assistance topics?
   Were there differences across sites?

2. Where locals implemented learnings from YETAP, what, if any, attendant problems existed with those implementations? What special implementation problems might future technical assistance address?

3. To what extent do local personnel perceive the invitational workshops as valuable?

   Were there differences across technical assistance topics?
   Were there differences across sites?

4. How efficient and effective was the feasibility study?

5. What are the characteristics of the relationships between local agencies and the prime sponsors? And, what kind of planning information does this provide YETAP?

6. What was the quality of the communication and working relationships betwen YETAP staff and local personnel?

7. How effective was the needs assessment process?

8. What has been the effect of YETAP on the development of interagency linkages within service recipient communities? What conributions have the Youth Employment Day and the Regional Capacity Building Workshops made to these linkages?

9. To what extent was the Youth Employment Day successful?

   In the perceptions of participating youth?
   In terms of the visibility and interagency linkages with local (agency name)?

10. Were the training agreements effective in setting clear expectations by locals for technical assistance service?

11. What were the impacts of the National Newsletter produced by YETAP staff?

12. To what extent was the overall YETAP valuable to local progams?
    To what extent has the political and economic climate of 1981 mediated the effectiveness of YETAP?

These questions formed the focus of the entire evaluation process. They guide development of instruments, the data collection procedures, and are answered by the data analysis.

IV. Conclusions about the Process

The procedure was effective, as judged at many levels. The evaluators believed that most of the resulting questions got at the heart of the program, even incorporating its unarticulated intentions, were sufficiently comprehensive, and were manageable.

The program staff at first felt uncomfortable about what they felt was possible bias in setting the criteria for their evaluation, but as time went on they reported that this bias was adequately counterbalanced by the evaluators' probing. Otherwise, they were extremely interested in the questions and therefore paid keen attention to information as it began to gather. They were also, in places, upset at some results which could be construed as negative effectiveness on the program's part.

The final level of effective judgment came from the administrative level above the program. A key figure there entered the interactions after the questions were decided and objected that the evaluation was to investigate the key points in the contract with Labor, not the questions the staff wanted. A thorough scouring of the contract then revealed that every point for which the agency was explicitly responsible was covered by the high priority DEM questions.

The procedure described in the paper, while simple, is not trivial. Some DEM projects have taken place in which the attempt was made to measure all possible outcomes, and the resulting information was too superficial to be effective. To go to the other extreme, limiting the areas of investigation without any clear guiding principle can easily result in evaluation results that miss important areas or cover some with unnecessary thoroughness. The procedure advocated here will increase both the effectiveness of data collection, by maximizing utility, and its efficiency, by concentrating efforts.

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